7. Finnissy's Voices

James Weeks

Abstract: 'Finnissy's Voices' explores Finnissy's relationship to the voice through a detailed consideration of two works for vocal ensemble, *Tom Fool's Wooing* (1975-8/2015) and *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* (2012-13).

Tom Fool's Wooing is first considered as a presentation of an archetypal vocality: an abstract wedding ritual in three tableaux, it begins with single voices calling across wide spaces, gradually forming dialogues and groups and culminating in the intimacy of the wedded couple. The concept of 'staging' is considered, not only from the perspective of drama and ritual but also in the way the voice may be said to 'stage' the subject, and singing be said to 'stage' the voice, intensifying it and giving it a special aura. This is linked to the physicality of sound production in the voice through a consideration of its extraordinary technical demands: by making such extreme demands on the singer Finnissy explicitly embodies the voice, locating it tangibly within the singer's entire body, thus articulating a radical physical performativity in which 'song' is reconnected with 'singing' as a bodily act. This physicality is enacted through muscular movement, leading to an analogy with dance – vocality here is construed as 'voice-dance' taking place primarily within the body.

The second part of the chapter poses the question to whom these voices and bodies belong, exploring questions of identity and roleplay in *Cipriano* (1974), *Seven Sacred Motets* (1991) and *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto.* The latter is considered in view of its relationship to representation and realism in both madrigalian tradition and opera, as exemplified by the contrasting outlooks of Gesualdo and Monteverdi, positing it as a hybrid of both genres. The work's relationship to the Gesualdo source material is explored in detail, as is its complex and multifarious approach to vocality, roleplay and identity. The nature of the work as an 'uncomfortable…synthesis of many things, stemming often from very diverse sources'[1] is discussed with respect to musical materials, structure and vocality; in conclusion, it is argued that in this work the voice emerges from the body as the primary locus of our performance of sexuality and subjectivity.

'Is not song that arena where the voice is so spectacularly displayed, fuelled by so many breathless propulsions, fantasies, sexualities, and dreams?...The singer…come[s] to occupy a space of messianic figuring, embodying all that may drive us beyond ourselves, to incite metaphysical, social, and erotic gathering.'
Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*.[2]

The human voice has a central place in Michael Finnissy's work. Our first image of him may be that of a pianist-composer (see chapters 3, 5 and 12 for more perspectives on Finnissy's work as a pianist-composer and a concert pianist) – yet arguably it is not the piano but the voice which lies closest to the heart of his compositional identity. 'If you listen to my earliest works,' he has said, 'the voice (in its melodic rather than declamatory aspect) has always been paramount',[3] and Christopher Fox,

writing on Finnissy's vocal music in the 1997 volume *Uncommon Ground*,[4] points out that not only did roughly a third of his works up to that point involve singers – an unusually high proportion for contemporary composers – but that many of his instrumental works too are derived or transcribed from vocal music, including the *Verdi Transcriptions*, the *Gershwin Arrangements*, the *Obrecht Motetten* and much of the music based on folk and non-Western source materials.[5] As Finnissy attests, part of the voice's significance to him lies in its tendency to melody: his is an art of line, of connective lyric movement spun out over a breath.[6] But it also lies in the voice's inextricably personal nature, its tendency to subjectivity – a 'body trying to be a subject' as LaBelle describes it[7] – emerging from inside us into the world around, creating and projecting us as selves, and searching for connection with others. The prevailing humanism of Finnissy's art – confessional, connective, questing, expressively direct and emotionally demonstrative – finds in the voice its primal vehicle; his work manifests across the decades an abiding concern with the complex nature of this most bodily, most personal of instruments – what it is to give voice, to vocalise, to speak or sing in different contexts and different ways, private or public, as an individual or as part of a collective.

Who, then, are Finnissy's Voices, and what defines them? My intention in this chapter is to probe the above generalisations a little more deeply and investigate the nature and nuances of Finnissian vocality in two vocal ensemble works written thirty-five years apart: *Tom Fool's Wooing* (1975-8, rev. 2015) and *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* (2012-13).[8] I choose these pieces out of the dozens of possible examples not only from personal familiarity[9] but also because the liminal nature of the vocal ensemble – balanced ambiguously (indeed, 'equivocally') between the soloistic and the choral – presents a particularly rich site for the exploration of different modes of voicing, of the construction of vocal subjectivities and their performance. It will be seen that Finnissy fully exploits the medium's polysemic vocal potential in both of these works; even so they offer only a snapshot of the vast and still-expanding range of Finnissian vocality as it continues to engage with an ever-widening field of vocal traditions (professional and amateur, classical and folk, Western and non-Western) and repertoires. Nevertheless, the extreme virtuosity of these pieces betokens a composer unrestricted by pragmatism and able to write freely: thus, a particularly fertile source of insight into Finnissy's relationship to the voice.

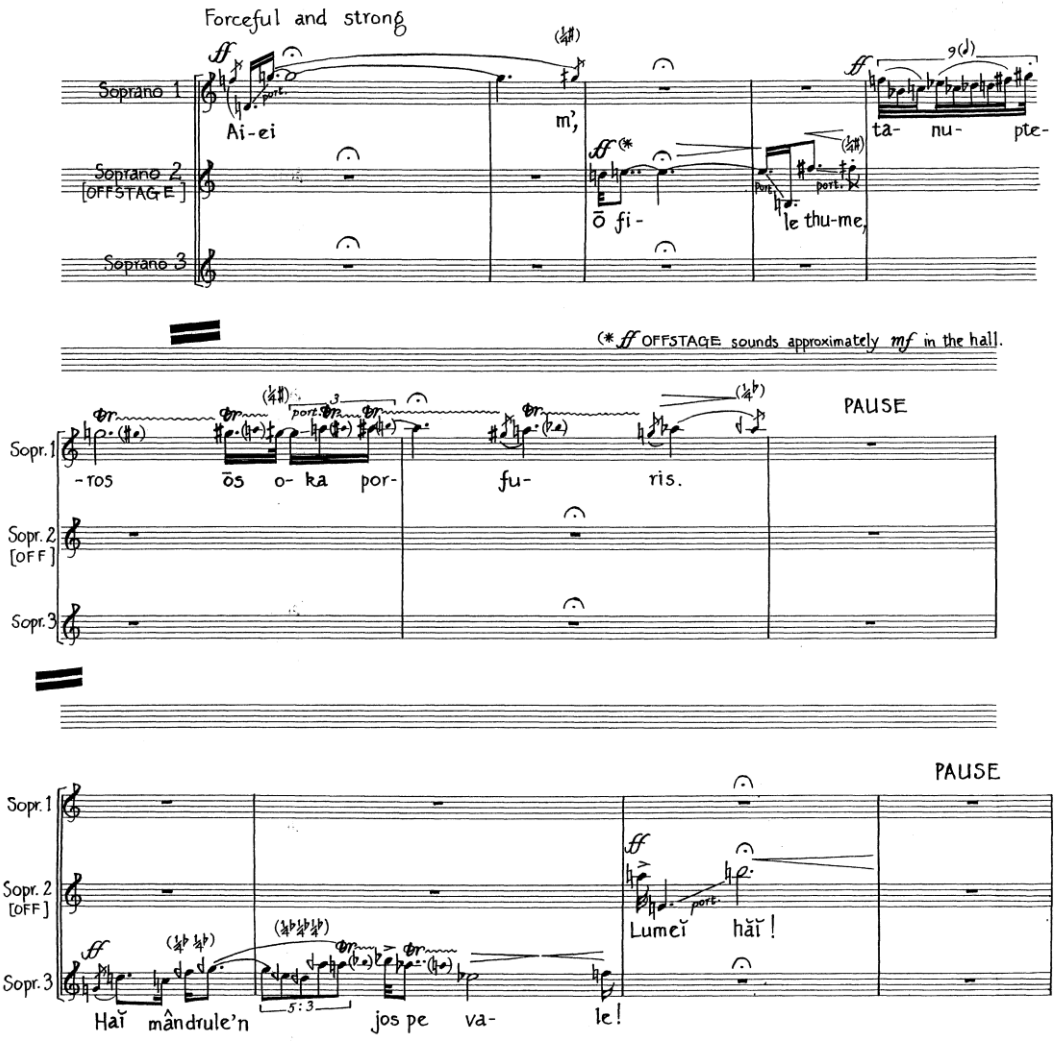
Tom Fool's Wooing: Voices as Archetypes, Voices as Bodies

Tom Fool's Wooing, for fourteen solo voices (with two singers doubling on congas) was written between 1975 and 1978 for the John Alldis Choir, who had previously performed Finnissy's first vocal ensemble work *Cipriano* (1974) to great acclaim. Both works have a relationship to the theatre, but whereas *Cipriano* is a straightforwardly dramatic work, with a named protagonist sung by a solo tenor and a clear narrative arc, *Tom Fool* frames its central theatrical section (a setting of an English Mummer's Play) between two more abstract *tableaux vivants*. The theme of the work is marriage and the joys of love: the outer panels create a montage of texts about amorous desire and courtship from various folk sources (Romanian, Greek, Turkish) while two singers (mezzo and tenor soloists) assume the roles of Bride and Groom, singing passages from Spenser's *Epithalamion.* The opening section, featuring dialogues between onstage and offstage female voices, seems to be set just prior to the wedding itself, with its presentation of groups first of women then of men,

though there is no explicit sequence of events, and a literal marriage ceremony is not depicted. Instead, in the central panel, Finnissy replaces it with an astonishing *coup-de-théâtre:* the English Mummer's Play, a ridiculous burlesque which casts the music abruptly out of its erotic reverie and into a parodical 'real world', reminiscent of the appearance of the rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* After a somewhat perfunctory resolution to this absurd action, the music stages a swift cinematic dissolve into a revolving, starry universe of quiet, blissful consummation in which the two solo singers are lulled by the other voices, who gradually become more distant and disperse in their male and female groups to end the work.

Tom Fool was not performed on its initial completion; instead it waited almost forty years for a premiere in 2016, for which occasion Finnissy chose to rewrite the Mummer's Play completely, replacing its Maxwell Davies-esque expressionist parody with an idiom of simple homorhythmic textures accompanied by crude drum patterns. Thus one of the most striking features of the work is the startling change of stylistic, dramatic and vocal registers at the appearance of this shockingly pared-down (though far from simple) mummer's music, a substitution all the more disorientating coming between music of almost unprecedentedly transcendental vocalism: the outer sections of *Tom Fool's Wooing* are a *ne plus ultra* of Finnissy's 1970s vocal writing, presenting stupendous musical and technical challenges almost unmatched in the vocal ensemble repertory.

Demanding as it may be, much of the vocality of *Tom Fool's Wooing* is rooted in fundamental vocal archetypes, connected with the work's similarly archetypal themes of love, courtship and coupling. It begins with a group of female voices calling out singly across imaginary vast distances (represented by a variety of onstage and offstage placements) after the manner of Swedish *kulning* (cattle-calling): strong, focused, extremely high sounds whose rhythmic and pitch contours are designed to catch the attention and identify the caller (Ex. 7.1). This is the primary function of the voice, which, according to Brandon LaBelle, 'operates as an essential force that animates the other to bring him or her closer to me, while also prompting my own […] I speak in order to locate myself near you.'[10]



Ex. 7.1. Finnissy, *Tom Fool's Wooing* (1975-8, rev. c. 2015), opening. © Universal Edition 1979.

The first act performed in *Tom Fool* is thus one of connecting. The sopranos call out into the void to establish contact, no more: one can hear these initial vocalisations as more like calls than melodies, however ornate and spectacular they may be. So before there is music, there is a sounding-out of voices, bringing them together; gradually dialogues begin to emerge as more singers come onstage, and the voices are slowly becalmed and intertwined until they reach together a moment of harmony and rest. At that exact moment the male voices enter shouting, followed almost immediately by the mezzo soprano (the bride). With the whole company met, the mezzo sings an aria announcing the dawning of the marriage day, embedded in ecstatic wordless vocalisations from the chorus, before the scene dissolves and the drums enter, foreshadowing the Mummer's Play. The whole first panel, then, enacts an arrival: a movement from far-and-dispersed to near-and-together. These ideas of dialogue, of coming into harmonious relation with another, from one, to two, to many, inform the piece on every level; indeed, it could be said that the piece proceeds by *staging* a series of dialogues or ritual communications between individuals and groups.

The most overt staging follows in the form of the Mummer's Play. This too takes the form of a series of dialogues and pits male and female groups against each other in

humorous dispute. Following the drama's resolution, the third panel opens with all fourteen voices together for the first time in the piece. This extraordinary, densely luxuriant texture frames a lyrical duet for the two lovers, their voices in audibly harmonious relation as they sing modal rather than chromatic material for the only time in the whole piece. They share the same text (Spenser again), entwining round each other's parts; sometimes their melodies pull apart, other times they merge into one line. Around them floats the wordless chorus, both male and female, supporting and cushioning the lovers with sound right across the entire human vocal spectrum from very low to very high, in a moment of supreme conjunction. A final staged dialogue then occurs as the lovers disentangle, first mezzo then tenor singing enraptured solos while the chorus bifurcates into a slow suspended texture for the women and gruff, *sotto voce* interjections for the men. This closing image dies away, and the work is over.

Viewing *Tom Fool's Wooing* as a sequence of staged dialogues seems apt, for the work references throughout ideas of drama, rite and ceremony, placing the personal aspect of marriage (the two lovers) within its larger ritual and societal context (the chorus) in a similar way to Stravinsky's *Les Noces* (which it closely echoes, dramaturgically if not musically). These archetypal human relations are often articulated by similarly archetypal vocal tropes: the opening's calling-out, as has been shown, but also the use of shouted exclamation, hymn-singing (which appears at the end of the Mummer's Play) and the lyrical writing which dominates the lovers' roles. But an invocation of archetypes is insufficient to account for the spectacular vocal display from both soloists and chorus which pervades the outer panels of the work and constitutes its most remarkable feature. In seeking to understand the place of this ostentatiously excessive vocality within the work's aesthetic conception one can again make use of the idea of staging, for it is only a short leap from considering the voice as a connective vibration leading from inside the body to outside, to recognising the role of the voice in the *staging* of our subjectivity. That is, one may view the voice itself as a stage on which the subject appears, a stage on which many different performances can take place, and one on which the subject can play many different roles.

This is particularly clear when considering what it is to sing rather than speak. Firstly, it is a raising of the voice (literally and figuratively), an expressive intensification through its focusing of the voice onto one pitch:

'As a special sounding, singing draws the energies of the body outward, to fill the chest, to ring the mouth, and to flood the nasal cavity with vibration. The entire body seems to stand up, resounding with tonality, whether real or imagined, tuned or not.'[11]

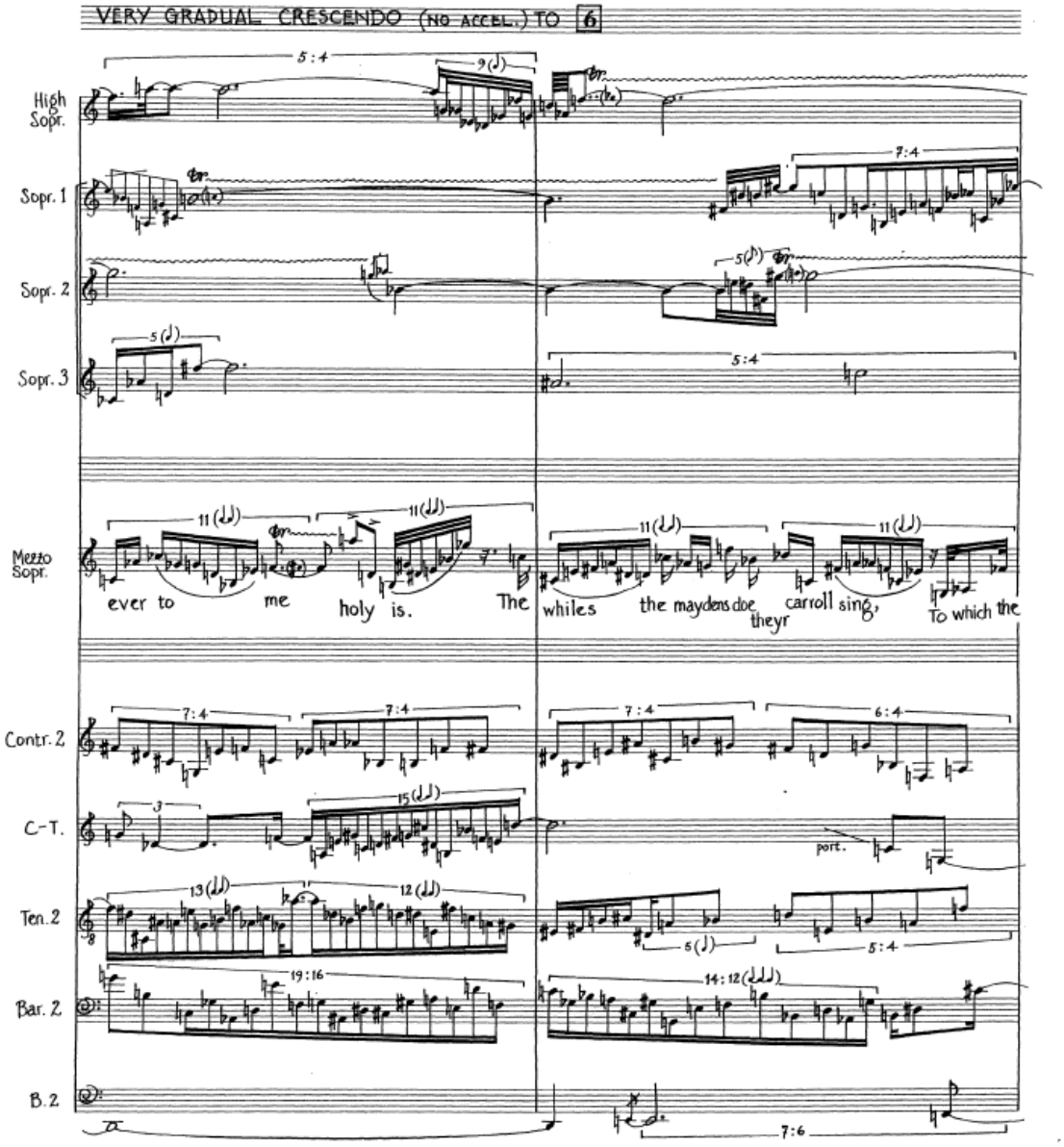
If the voice stages the subject then singing may be said further to stage the voice, so that it takes on a special aura. To sing is to dramatise, to stage, to take on a role beyond that of ordinary spoken communication. The difference is physical: singing is the product of a special action, more focused than that of speech, that has a special effect on the body, that of resonance. LaBelle emphasises above some of the bodily vectors involved – the breath filling the chest, the vocal chords vibrating and producing sound, the sound resonating through the cavities in the head – until, as he says, the entire body seems to stand up, tuned-in to the sung frequency.

Finnissy's conception of the voice in *Tom Fool's Wooing*, rooted as we have seen in notions of connecting, communicating and bringing us into relation with others, is also deeply engaged with the physicality of its production. Indeed, what is perhaps most remarkable about Finnissy's construction of vocality here is the way that it explicitly *embodies* the voice, locating it within the singer's entire body and articulating a radical physical performativity without which an understanding of this work as a sort of disembodied 'music' is incomplete. In *Tom Fool,* song – that is, a musico-poetic giving-voice – is reconnected with singing as a *bodily* act: this is certainly to a great extent music *about* singing, but further, singing itself is constituted here as the physical performance of being-human. Finnissy's approach to embodying his voices is to set up extreme performative situations that uncover one or another aspect of the voice's physicality. The extremities at play are obvious: here, vocal display becomes a stripping-naked, a revealing of the flesh and blood in the sound; at times in *Tom Fool* this becomes an almost improper, and certainly dangerous, act – the singer as athlete, as gymnast, as daredevil. This is a form of staging that leads us back inwards, towards the inner mechanics of sound production, now revealed as fantastic physical exhibition.

In this display, all aspects of vocal production are on show. To begin with, the raw material for the voice is breath, which is not customarily notated but is of course implied: so the first action of *Tom Fool* is the drawing of a breath to produce the required 'forceful, strong' sound. We are constantly aware of breath in *Tom Fool* – on the pauses on notes (how long can the singer hold?), in the pauses between the notes, and most obviously in the lengths of phrases. The singer's breath control is audibly pushed to the limit: breathing itself becomes a topic of the music. Moving to the notes themselves, the most obvious aspect to Finnissy's writing in the outer sections is the constant, rapid traversal of the range between low and high, often giving the sensation of jumping or leaping, and produced by tensing and relaxing the vocal chords to change the pitch, a muscular flexing whose physicality is here foregrounded by the sheer extremity of the writing. At the opening of the piece this merges with the affective and even programmatic intentions of the passage: a statement of presence, and the associations of the mating display, complete with the quivering trills of sexual excitement.

A subtler configuration of similar ideas can be seen at the first entry of the mezzo-soprano, the bride. Ex. 7.2 shows the start of a gradual crescendo up to *fff;* the mezzo's material is essentially that of the chorus, but she sings a little louder, and has text, where the chorus has none – in other words, they have singing, but she has song. We can see the same virtuosic movement across the vocal range as earlier, but now the dynamic is *pp* for the chorus and *mp* for the mezzo, so the element of display is contained, or *restrained*. Instead, this muscular flexing, the singers delicately touching each note before moving swiftly to the next, feels more like a waking, a stretching, a toning-up or sensitising towards a state of physical hyper-awakeness, an association heightened by the chorus' lack of text: it is pure voice, and purely physical vocality. The mezzo's text places her at one remove from this fully embodied state, until the music gets louder and louder and her words become further spaced apart. As the music gets louder, the air pressure across the vocal chords increases to produce more volume, bodily effort becomes more intense and things quite literally heat up. As for breathing, across the five pages of this passage there are no rests at all in any

part apart from tiny gasps for the mezzo, so here Finnissy has evoked the mounting erotic excitement of the passage yet further by literally making his singers breathless.



Ex. 7.2. Finnissy, *Tom Fool's Wooing*, from first section. © Universal Edition 1979.

Such a foregrounding of the singers' physical presences also reveals what Roland Barthes famously described as the 'grain of the voice': 'the body in the voice as it sings'.[12] Although for Barthes the voice's grain is bound up with its articulation of text, which is generally underemphasised or entirely absent in the outer sections of *Tom Fool*, the physicality of the voice – its strains, pressures, muscular flexes, registral breaks and snatched breaths, the entire mechanism under thrilling duress – closely intersects Barthes' statement that 'I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relationship is erotic.'[13] It could be objected that the exorbitant difficulty of the music as notated, both in terms of pitching and rhythm, militates against a singer being able fully to

embody such physicality – is there not too much to think about? Certainly this too-muchness, this informational excess, is a feature of both Finnissy and Ferneyhough in this era: rather than invoking a straightforward physicality, the sense of vocal embodiment in *Tom Fool* coexists in a tension with other impulses driving the work, impulses concerning not only the sounding result as conventionally construed but also the act of notation, the manipulation and permutation of compositional materials and even the physicality of the act of writing down. The music sets up, exists within, and draws its strength from these tensions, which we as listeners and performers alike are asked to negotiate. In *Tom Fool,* the physical impulse to make the sound is entrammelled within the intricate web of the notation. This may well at times involve the singer having to let go of the pitches in order to achieve the physical and affective presence of the sound, but whatever the compromises necessitated, the challenging notes and rhythms ultimately serve the singers in a positive way: the notation acts for them as a focus for the physical geometry required, a precision tuning-in of the vocal apparatus that gives focus, clarity and tautness to the final result, an expressive charge intensified by the extremity of the pressures that give rise to it.

Tom Fool's Wooing demonstrates a unique capturing of the physicality of vocal performance within the frame of notationally hyper-detailed, formal concert work**.** We might even consider the piece as a kind of 'vocal ballet' in which the voice is *choreographed* by the notation, the dance taking place within the vocal apparatus and compacted into the bodies of the singers themselves. At least, it has now been shown that Finnissy's Voices are not merely images of the human but real Bodies; that the essence of Finnissian vocality is located absolutely inside the body and is bound up in the performance of that bodiliness. But whose bodies are they? *Tom Fool's Wooing,* for all its physical human presence, leaves us only with archetypes – the lovers, the wedding chorus, the buffoonish characters of the Mummer's Play. To explore the question of subjectivity more deeply it is necessary to turn to a more recent work in which the performance of the self is articulated in more complex and subtle ways.

***Gesualdo: Libro Sesto*: The Voice and the Self**

'I'm aware that my work is an uncomfortable, often by design, synthesis of many things, stemming from often very diverse forces, but they're unified by this sexual thrust.' Michael Finnissy in conversation with Christopher Fox and Ian Pace, 1996.[14]

To whom do these voices and these bodies belong? They are always someone's. If there is an element of abstraction to the human 'types' of *Tom Fool's Wooing,* the singers are nevertheless given some vital attributes: they are gendered, and above all they are sexualised, particularly the lovers, whose music and its physical performance are inescapably erotic. The work, as we have seen, stages a coming-together, from individuals to couples or larger groups; the final stages (from Fig. 24 in the score onwards), with their grunted male jabs and ecstatic female cries over the mezzo's triumphant 'For lo! the wishèd day is come at last' is about as graphic a depiction of sexual intercourse as could be imagined, short of literally miming the act itself. As Finnissy provocatively implies, the sexual – in its broadest sense – lies at the root of his work, as, one might suggest, it lies at the root of all human interaction, the basis of our desires, motivations, and impulses towards the social.

All Finnissy's works, but particularly his vocal works, involve themselves more or less explicitly in an exploration of this essential human condition. Finnissy's voices are not only bodies but someone's bodies, placed in relation to these cardinal questions through which they interrogate their own humanity.[15] As we have seen, it is the embodied voice which performs this subjectivity, as LaBelle argues:

> 'it is my view that the voice is also a full body, always already a voice subject, rich with intentions and meanings; sexed and gendered, classed and raced, accented, situated, and inflected by the intensities of numerous markings and their performance (inscriptions, erasures, recitals…). I would argue that the voice is always identified (though not always identifiable); it is flexed by the body, by the subject in all its complicated vitality. Someone (or something) speaks to me, and it is not the voice I hear, but rather the body, the subject; not a disembodied intensity, a speech without body, but as someone that enters, intrudes, demands, or requests, and that also seeks.'[16]

In *Cipriano* (1974) the embodied, sexualised nature of the 'voice subject' is woven deeply into the thematics of the work, which explores a conflict between sexual abstinence in the service of God and the sinfulness of carnality. The text was collated by Finnissy from Calderón de la Barca's play *El Mágico Prodigioso* (1637), and projects us into a dramatic confrontation between St Cyprian (played by a solo tenor) and a Demon, who tempts him to give into fantasies of the flesh and yield to its offers of 'the wisdom of the old world, sweet oblivion of all thought, and the love of beautiful women'. At the beginning of the work Cyprian is alone on stage, bravely resisting his own carnal desires by holding himself chaste within a single tone (the middle C on which he chants, like a charm against evil), deaf to dialogue, to encounter, to flex, to movement or dance. Both he and the singer playing him are held in an unnatural tension, as physical as it is spiritual, against the pressures and pleasures of being a body. The Demon, played by the rest of the ensemble, begins offstage (as it were *disembodied*, ironically no more than a figment of his imagination), shouting, grunting, flexing, writhing about in an excess of bodiliness, forcing Cyprian to redouble his will. As the hallucinatory temptations intensify, the singers join Cyprian on the stage one by one, led by a vision of female love, Justina, sung to music of lyrical suppleness by the mezzo soprano. At the end of Finnissy's *scena* Cyprian does seem finally to overcome the demon's temptations as the chorus finally dissolves, turning their backs on him. But Cyprian's final statements of resolution and faith ring ambiguously into the emptiness: as he dedicates his body to God rather than the pleasures of the flesh, his voice breaks and lashes out, his final word – '*cuerpo'* – 'body' – screamed into the silent abyss. This last word becomes, as it were, the event-horizon of his agony, as Cyprian names that which truly torments him; in this fully embodied vocal act, Cyprian acknowledges and accepts his yearning for the corporeal in the abstinence that must now be his lot.

In *Cipriano* Finnissy's strategy is devastatingly clear, the musical contrast between Cyprian's denial of the body and the Demon's extravagantly virtuosic fleshliness pushed to extremes in creating this supremely dramatic scene. But even in less explicitly sexualised contexts the vocal performance of subjectivity is inextricable from the instantiation of bodily presence: there is always *someone* who 'enters, intrudes, demands, requests…seeks'. One of the most interesting aspects of much of Finnissy's music on religious themes, for instance, is the sense that the true subject is the worshippers and their desire to come together, to congregate in prayer, rather than any doctrine they may be expressing. *This Church* (2001-3, awaiting revision) is a

celebration of community written for members of that community to perform; other works such as *Marriage* (2008) and *Christening* (2007) invoke rites of passage which involve the tying of the individual into union with another, or into a community. *Seven Sacred Motets* (1991) 'stages' twelfth-century music through an interlocked cycle of biblical narratives and hymns, identifying 'with the ideas and character of another century in order to explore oneself and the contemporary world'.[17] Once again we are watching people singing together, forming a congregation of believers: these believers in turn identify with, relate themselves to, episodes from the life of the Virgin Mary that deal with her joy at her conception, her relationship with her son, and the grieving community of disciples around the foot of the Cross. The texts of the hymns that surround these narratives are also gendered, directed towards Mary, the supreme icon of femininity, in prayers for intercession and for pregnant women. Finnissy's music is likewise attentive to gender: male and female voices take turns to articulate chant and drone, but overall the cycle is weighted towards female voices, whose florid, soaring solo lines, particularly in the final Hildegard setting, are perhaps the defining musical image of the work.

Thus a work ostensibly concerned with sacred doctrine can be seen to be rooted in a deeper articulation of Finnissy's humanism, an abiding concern for those who come together to express such doctrine, their identity, and their motivations for doing so. The subtle exploration of gender through the cycle shows Finnissy as a composer particularly sensitive to identity, to voices that are 'sexed and gendered, classed and raced, accented, situated'; thirty-five years after the straightforward dramatic oppositions of *Cipriano* and the time-honoured sexual archetypes of *Tom Fool's Wooing,* he was to revisit the subjects of sexuality, identity and desire in a vocal ensemble work of richer and more multi-layered depths, *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* (2012-13).

Finnissy's programme note for the work is succinct but revealing: 'Gesualdo's sixth book of Madrigals provides a source for this piece, the texts and a few fragments of his music. Beyond that the fantasies are mine: about music, about love and death, about the voice.'[18] The note explicitly invites us (as if Gesualdo's texts weren't explicit enough) to consider the work in terms of 'fantasies', that is, acts of the unloosed imagination, dreams of the improbable or impossible, reveries of desire in which music, love, death and vocality are inextricably entwined. The piece is in seven untitled movements, each of them re-setting a text from Gesualdo's last book of madrigals for one or another combination of eight solo vocalists, thus:

I	(Se la mia morte brami)	two trios, ATB-ATB
II	(Volan quasi farfalle)	two duos, SS-BB
III	(Beltà, poi che t'assenti)	quartet, AATT
IV	(Quel "no" crudel)	duo, SS
V	(Alme d'Amor rubelle)	tutti, SSAATTBB
VI	(Resta di darmi noia)	quintet, SAATB, with S and T emerging as soloists
VII	(Al mio gioir)	tutti, SSAATTBB

Gesualdo: Libro Sesto, written for EXAUDI, marks a late return to virtuoso vocal ensemble writing, and in several movements (II, III and IV particularly) we see a similar type of extreme linear vocal gymnastics to that of *Tom Fool*, though now

reconfigured as 'histrionic' display in the service of expressions of pained love. Elsewhere a much wider range of materials is explored, moving from the 'delicious anguish' of Gesualdan chromatic polyphony (I and VI) to soloistic fireworks (the latter half of VI), and in the two *tutti* movements an eerie chordal stasis, one rising inexorably from *ppppp* to *ffff!,* the other juxtaposing emphatic *fff* chords with mysterious, soft, wave-like antiphonal exchanges between quartets of singers. Whilst ostensibly a set of madrigals the tone is frequently operatic and latently scenic (or again, 'staged'), in the manner of Monteverdi's later books rather than those of Gesualdo. Finnissy himself sees a comparison between these madrigals and the later dramatic Monteverdi 'in their expressionist ardour…but in much darker, and more lethally volatile, more Gothick, colours.'[19]

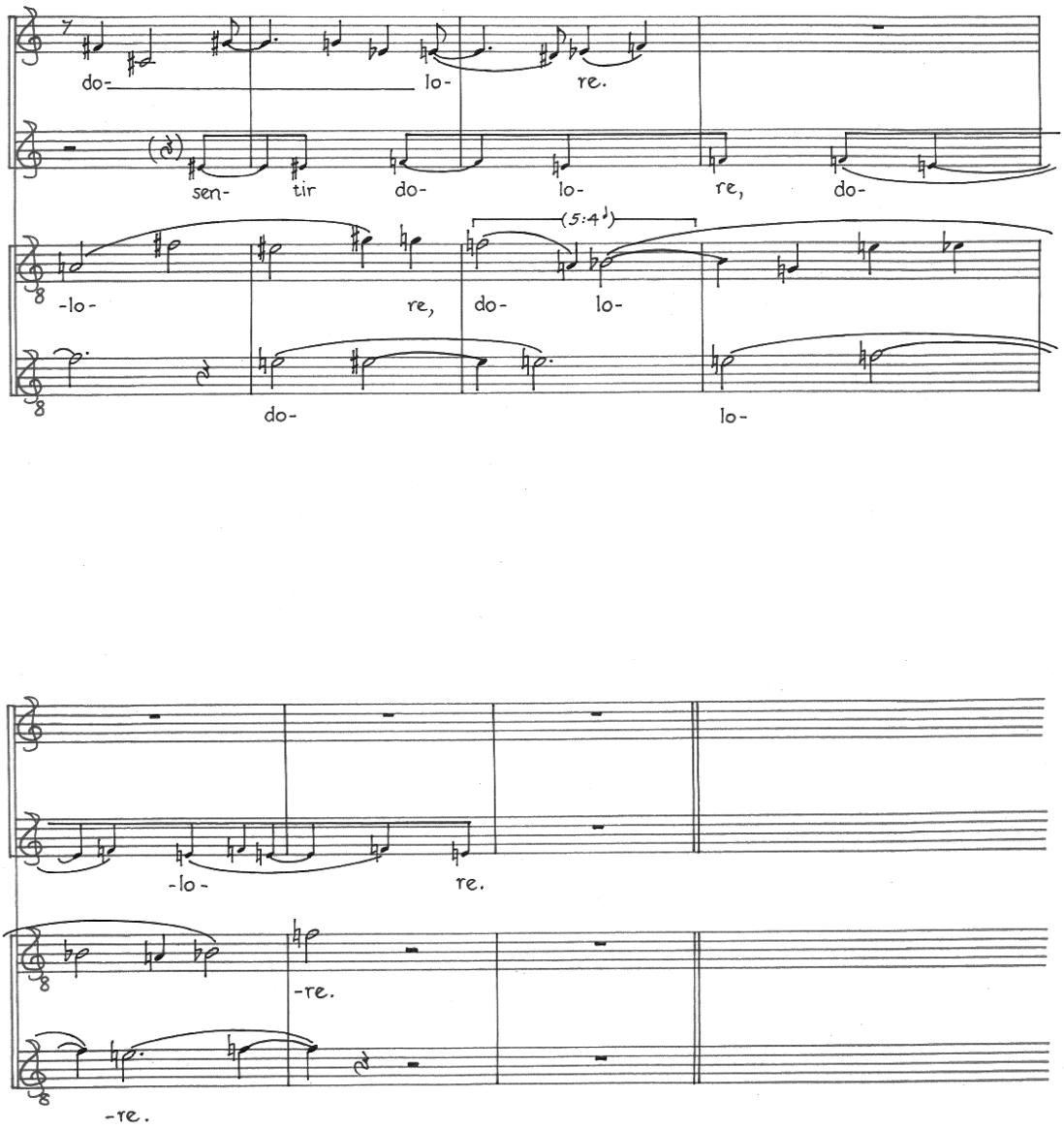
Indeed, the cycle can be viewed as presenting a conflation or combination of genres and dramatic registers between *a cappella* late-Renaissance madrigal and opera. The singers are variously members of a chorus, slightly more autonomous consort voices, and fully autonomous soloists, and often two of these at the same time (the pairs of soloistic voices in II and III, for instance). This fluidity of genre, register and 'casting' is significant in opening up the work's play of subjectivity and identity far beyond traditional madrigal conventions. Rather than an archaic and inherently artificial texture of anonymous multiple voices under strict contrapuntal jurisdiction, all articulating the same subjective, amorous text and frequently personifying indiscriminately male and female characters, madrigalianism is presented here as a site of subjective ambiguity and multiplicity, moving in and out of, and playing with, these conventions at will. In this respect of course Finnissy is invoking the later history of the madrigal, which exhibits very similar tensions between artifice and dramatic realism in the works of *seconda pratica* composers, particularly the Monteverdi of Books V-VIII: by reaching back to this liminal moment in musical history and poising his cycle right on the representational threshold, Finnissy is able to lead us into a richly ambiguous world, where roleplay, masquerade and cross-dressing abound, a mixed quartet of soloists can lament the same lover, and a pair of sopranos proclaim triumph over a pair of scarlet lips.

In the light of this, the choice of Gesualdo as source text is intriguing and significant. If so much of the work's representational ethos points towards the later Monteverdi, why use Gesualdo's last Book as a basis? As a madrigalist, Gesualdo faces in a quite different direction to Monteverdi: conceptually his music remains more or less squarely within madrigalian conventions and is scarcely concerned with dramatic (that is, theatrical or realistic) representation, instead expressing its avant-gardism through the exploration of extreme chromaticism and a striking rhetorical style based on the stark juxtaposition of radically opposing emotional states and musical materials. Coupled with the well-worn biographical tales of uxoricide, sexual ambiguity and mental instability,[20] what has been most fascinating to composers and listeners of the modern age has been the image of Gesualdo's music as expressively transgressive, manifesting a complex psychology of sexuality and desire through musically exaggerated states of psychic extremity (joy, grief, love, premonition of death) and their unsettling mingling. This modern reading of Gesualdo's late madrigals owes perhaps more than we can know to our inherited contemporary notions of psychology and to late Romantic and Expressionist movements in the arts, and it is nigh-on impossible to gauge from the music itself to what extent the emotional content is intended sincerely rather than as contrived histrionics (in this

respect again Gesualdo would seem to differ from Monteverdi);[21] nonetheless it is this image of Gesualdo that seems to lie behind the searing expressive temperature of Finnissy's set, its own tendency to 'lethally volatile…Gothick' extremes and stylistic excess. 'The melancholia is 'pathological', the joy a kind of hysteria. The piece is, again, a kind of exorcism (saving myself from visiting a psychotherapist!)', he observes.[22] The erotic, hyper-charged fantasies of the cycle are fuelled and given licence by Gesualdo's lead; nevertheless, they are Finnissy's own.

Finnissy adopts the seven madrigal texts in their entirety exactly as they appear in Gesualdo's book (the texts are anonymous and most probably self-penned); the use of Gesualdo's musical material is altogether more sparing and often hard to identify. There are moments of near-quotation – some of the basses' motifs in II, and the declamatory chordal openings to III and VI – and I and VI feature passages of faintly Renaissance-sounding modal counterpoint, though here the relation to Gesualdo's actual music is in fact more distant. More important than quotation or stylistic referencing appears to be the general principle of juxtaposing oppositions: Gesualdo's tendency to switch constantly between chordal and contrapuntal sections is writ large across the cycle in the extreme opposition of stark homophony and more or less dense polyphony, both within movements (III and VI feature both) and between them (II and IV are entirely polyphonic, V and VII entirely homophonic). A further Gesualdan opposition exploited throughout is that between modality and chromaticism. These are occasionally directly superimposed as distinct 'types' – as in I, where the lower trio's gently wandering modalism is impinged on and 'spoiled' by chromatic alterations in the upper trio – and in the latter half of VI, where the passionate, chromatic solo lines of tenor and soprano are underpinned by a single, held modal sonority. More often, however, the opposition of modality and chromaticism is integrated into the overall harmonic practice through the use of semitonal shifts away from modal sonorities: the overall harmony of I (that is, mixing together the two trios) demonstrates this, as do the closing bars of III and particularly the homophonic *tutti* movements, V and VII, many of whose chords are modal (often triadic) sonorities with one note semitonally displaced.

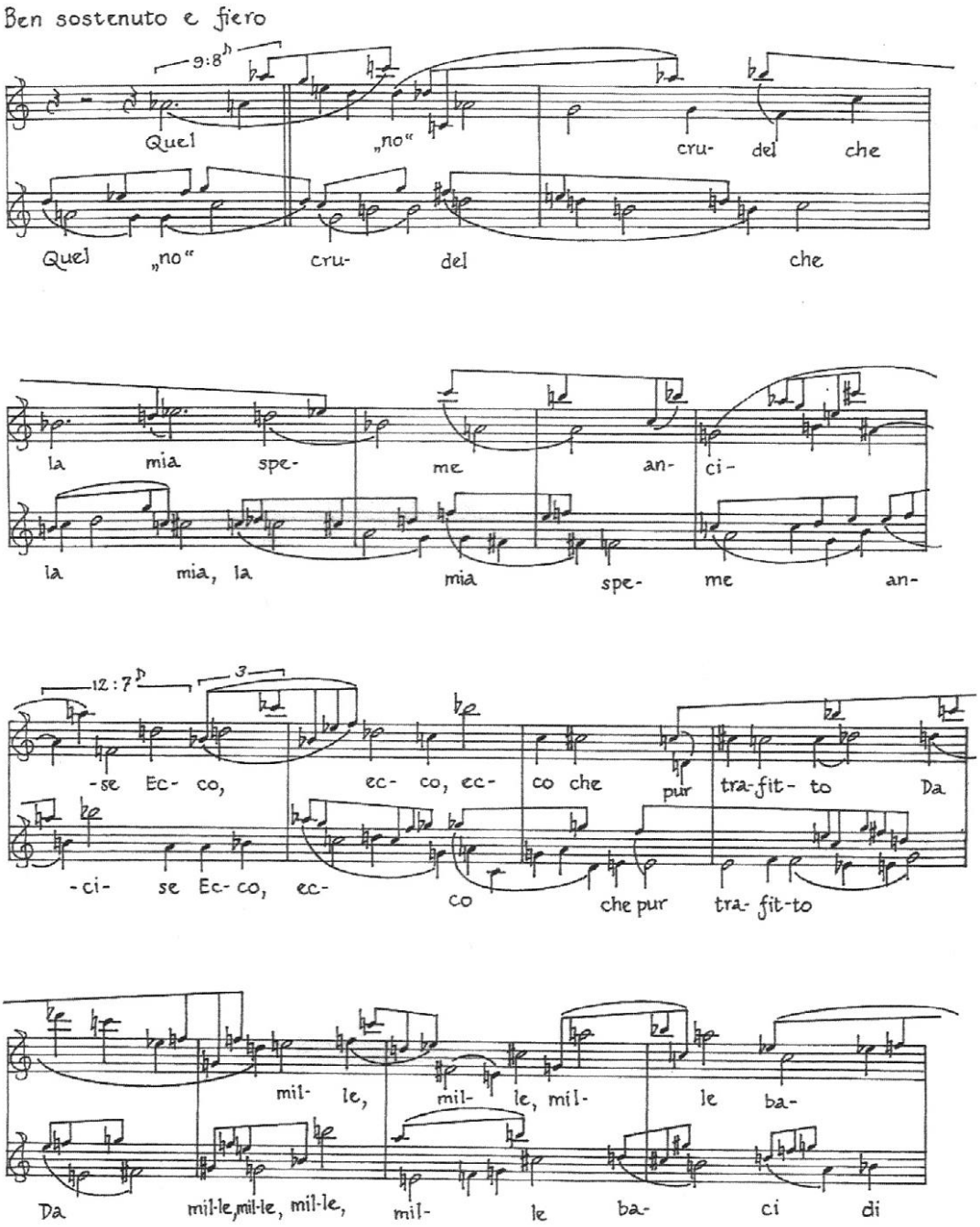
Thus Finnissy adopts and develops Gesualdo's harmonic and textural strategies, and the expressive principles underlying them, in different directions within the work. But his relationship with Gesualdo is, as we have seen, not the whole story. Even more striking a feature of the piece is the use of the voices themselves: the ever-shifting roles, the extreme juxtapositions of vocal manner, the provocative, abnormal combinations of voices within textures. VI, for example, begins as the most stylistically Gesualdan of the set, the five voices singing together in a chromatically-twisted chordal texture very similar to Gesualdo's own setting of the same text. Yet even in the first bar something is wrong. The tenor is far too high in the chord, perched on a top A, above both alto and even the soprano parts. The chord is unbalanced timbrally and in terms of vocal effort – the tenor cannot but sound like a soloist within what should apparently be a *tutti* texture.[23] A few bars later conventional service is resumed, but by the end of the madrigal this initial ambiguity of role appears prophetic: for later, almost out of nowhere, the soprano and tenor emerge from the contrapuntal texture into a full-blown operatic duet (Ex. 7.3), calling to each other in super-charged melismas at the top of their ranges while the altos and bass repeat a single held chord underneath.



Ex. 7.3. From Finnissy, *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* (2012-13), No. III. © Verlag Neue Musik, Berlin 2016.

Compared with this shocking, unexpected denouement, the roleplay in I is rather more understated. Here the composer's intention was to create a particular scene, the lower trio representing a group of madrigalists at the Court ('whose burdensome melancholy is nonetheless well-fed and bejewelled') and an upper trio as a Street group ('cold, thin and hungry') who are 'whining and wheedling for attention. These opposing groups are dagger drawn against each other.'[24] Both groups have the same ATB line-up, and what is most notable here is the way the two groups are overlaid in exactly the same register, making very precise delineation of characters difficult: even though the upper trio is ostensibly more soloistic, it has a tendency to blend into the lower. The piece maintains an uneasy, ambiguous equilibrium, a tense, ever-shifting symbiosis of the two antagonistic groups, as between solo and ensemble, opera and madrigal, realism and artifice. This theme thus established, Finnissy continues with two movements that further pursue the idea of multiplied voices and identities while

extending the scope of the work's vocality in extraordinary ways. II, perhaps the most remarkable textural conception of the cycle, offers the bizarre juxtaposition of two soprano and two bass voices, the latter narrating the text while the former flit around overhead as the moth-Cupids who are singed by the 'flame' of the lady's beauty (Ex. 7.4). The writing for the two sopranos is highly virtuosic, leaping constantly all over their full range (but *pianissimo e legatissimo*!), ostensibly soloistic material which is in fact textural and accompanimental, veiled and in the background yet impossible to ignore – the basses, charged with delivering the text, have no chance against this astonishing *sotto voce* display. Following this, III shows a similarly provocative combination of the four inner voices, struggling against one another in the same registral space, a strange and awkward blending of high tenor, mid-range countertenor (if one is used) and low mezzo that never allows the singers to settle into timbrally or vocally comfortable spaces. The sopranos return in IV, whereupon the veil of II is abruptly ripped off and the vocal exorbitance of *Tom Fool's Wooing* once again rekindled. This is a mad scene-cum-revenge aria for a double subject, the two singers as continually-erupting twin volcanoes of vocal lava: their lines relentlessly traverse the entire soprano tessitura, frequently in huge leaps, revealing once again the body (and the grain) in the voice. Nor should this be 'beautiful' singing: Finnissy's intention for the movement is that 'it is between two Street women who have 'made it', going from poverty to riches: they have little pride and are yelling, drawing attention to themselves. I think of the actress Anna Magnani as the embodiment of the quality I am seeking here: strong, passionate, angry, reckless, prepared to die for her beliefs.'[25]



Ex. 7.4. From Finnissy, *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto*, No. II. © Verlag Neue Musik, Berlin 2016.

And finally the two glacial *tuttis*, standing out from all the subjective, individualistic writhing as monolithic ‘choral’ statements, whose extreme extension of texture lies as far outside ‘normative’ compositional behaviour as the virtuoso movements around them. Here the whole company comes together, giving unison emphasis to the poetic meaning, but in spite of the unanimity any sense of conviction is elusive: the music, punctuated by silences, feels at once over-assertive and unsure of itself, provisional rather than definitive, the ‘joy’ we are offered in the final poem apparently undercut by the wistful emptiness of the work’s conclusion.[26]

The kaleidoscopic range of vocalities, vocal textures and vocal roleplay in *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* is reflected not only in the range of materials and compositional strategies and their relationship to the Gesualdo originals, as shown above, but also in the overall structural experience of the work. One is reminded of Finnissy's remark above about his intention to produce an 'uncomfortable synthesis' of things stemming from 'very diverse forces': there is no consistency or balance in *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto*, stylistic or structural – indeed, the arrangement of movements[27] suggests an intention to create a conspicuously asymmetric structure, perhaps taking its cue from Gesualdo's own strange formal strategies. In particular, the grouping of the three most virtuosic movements next to each other, and the loading of the rhetorical weight of the two slow *tutti* movements onto the end of the cycle, create a noticeable sense of structural disproportion. The work is, in sum, a disorientating and uncomfortable listening experience, from which we are left wondering: what were these fantasies, these performances, these stagings of the voice, of sexuality, of *eros*? To what end these mixings, multiplications and masquerades? And whose voices were they that performed them? They are, as Finnissy's brief programme note implies, the voices of his fantasy, a succession of phantoms or roleplays, visions appearing and disappearing, agents of an unrestricted exploration and confrontation with psychic extremes, both dark and light: it is from Gesualdo that Finnissy takes his cue, or permission, to probe these extremes without the false comfort of an easy resolution.

And Finnissy's Voices? They are all of us, searching for connection, in full possession of body, sexuality and selfhood. In *Tom Fool's Wooing* the extreme virtuosity and physicality of the vocal demands serve to place Finnissian vocality decisively within the body; in *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* the voice emerges from the body through strategies of multiplication and roleplay as the primary locus of our performance of sexuality and subjectivity. Finnissy's profound engagement across his entire career with the nature of voice, his recognition, exploration and celebration of vocality as the preeminent musical site for the articulation of our embodied humanity, places it at the very centre of his artistic vision and constitutes one of his most significant achievements.

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[1] 'Conversations with Michael Finnissy', in Henrietta Brougham, Christopher Fox and Ian Pace (eds.), *Uncommon ground: the Music of Michael Finnissy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p. 33.
[2] Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 45
[3] Michael Finnissy and James Weeks, '"I assume ENTANGLEMENT": Michael Finnissy on writing, drawing, listening, playing, collaborating' [*Website address to be added*]
[4] Christopher Fox, 'The Vocal Music', in Brougham, Fox, Pace, eds. *Uncommon Ground – The Music of Michael Finnissy* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1997), p. 211
[5] The proportion has dropped to a little more than a quarter of the total (nevertheless numbering over 100 works) in the ensuing twenty years, which have seen a steady stream of solo, vocal ensemble and particularly choral works emerge embracing a remarkable variety of vocal constituencies, from virtuoso professionals to amateur choirs, untrained voices and church congregations.
[6] For further discussion of linearity in Finnissy's music, see my chapter 12, 'Finnissy's Hand' in the present volume.
[7] LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, p. 5.
[8] Both works, as well as *Cipriano* (also discussed) can be heard on the CD *Michael Finnissy: Vocal Works 1974-2015* sung by EXAUDI (Winter & Winter, CD 910 246-2, 2018).
[9] As director of the ensemble EXAUDI I conducted the world premieres of both works: *Tom Fool's Wooing* at Milton Court, London on 12 March 2016 and *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* in St Paul's Hall, Huddersfield as part of Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, 23 November 2013.
[10] LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, p. 3.
[11] Ibid. p. 49.

[12] Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *Image-Music-Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (London, Fontana, 1977), p. 188
[13] Ibid.
[14] 'Conversations with Finnissy', p. 33.
[15] It might be argued that Finnissy's tendency to sexualise his performers in works like *Tom Fool's Wooing* could be seen as a form of objectification; this should be viewed from the perspective of these works as theatre or role-play – see the discussion of *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* below.
[16] LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, pp. 5-6.
[17] Michael Finnissy, quoted in Christopher Fox, liner note to *Michael Finnissy – Seven Sacred Motets* (Métier MSV CD92023, 1999).
[18] Michael Finnissy, programme note to *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto*, first published in programme book of Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, 2013, p. 52.
[19] Michael Finnissy, email communication with the author, 27 November 2013.
[20] See Glenn Watkins, *The Gesualdo Hex: Music, Myth, and Memory* (New York, WW Norton & Co., 2010) for an unsensationalised account.
[21] Susan McClary views Gesualdo's transgressive tactics – modal, structural and rhetorical – as sites of subjectivisation – for example, the use of drastic alternations of speed demonstrates one of his 'fundamental elements of interiority' – and notes further that 'Gesualdo's strategy of pitting neutral speech against stylized histrionics of anguish resonates with Judith Butler's notions of "performance" or subjectivity as masquerade'; Susan McClary, *Modal Subjectivities: Self-fashioning in the Italian Madrigal* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 149, 160.
[22] Finnissy, email communication with the author, 27 November 2013.
[23] A further Gesualdan trait that finds an echo in Finnissy's work is the tendency to write unusually (for the time) disjunct vocal lines and to take voices to the extremes of their range across the course of a madrigal. These 'expressionist' tactics are obviously reflected in *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto*, yet they are so much a part of Finnissy's own typical *modus operandi* that the stylistic congruence does not seem especially noteworthy. It might be suggested that Gesualdo has, in this and other ways, long been somewhat of a kindred spirit to Finnissy.
[24] Finnissy, email communication with the author, 27 November 2013.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Finnissy offers the following on these movements: '[they] should seem like a Greek Chorus, the voice of human experience, permanent, tireless, 'these things are always going to happen', whose wisdom we reluctantly bow to.' (ibid.)
[27] In fact, Finnissy was uncertain for a long time of the best ordering of the movements.